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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE CENTENARY OF "THANATOPSIS"

AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER FROM BRYANT

SIR,—The publication of *Thanatopsis* in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* a century ago introduced a new immortal to the temple of fame. Recognition was instantaneous. A century has only made that fame more secure.

From *Thanatopsis*, which probably belongs to 1811-12, to *The Flood of Years*, published in 1876, was a period of creative productivity unparalleled in literary history. For three-score-and-four years the mind of Bryant continued to create without abatement of force. If he did not add to his first great poem, he did not detract from it. He died at last of an accident, without sensible decay of his physical powers, and without impairment of his mental faculties. He left behind him no swan-song.

Thanatopsis appeared perfect originally. The closing paragraph of nine lines, which was added later, is a separate poem, and is reprinted and quoted commonly as such. It was doubtless written under the didactic influence which closed so many poems of the period with a moral, while beginning them with a Bible text. Criticism in certain theological quarters may have helped toward the addition of the lines, although it is more probable that the author himself acted on his own convictions. Something was wanted by the critics to deny the absolute sovereignty of physical or natural death, if not to suggest the resurrection of the body and the endless life beyond the grave. As late as 1860, an American poet, then scarcely known and now forgotten, published in his one book of poems a blank-verse reply, which he entitled *The New Thanatopsis*; but he said his reply was based on "the beautiful and psychological doctrines of Swedenborg." At Bryant's death in June, 1878, Henry Ward Beecher called *Thanatopsis* "a pagan hymn." As well might *The Descent from the Cross* be styled a false work of art because it does not suggest another canvas, *The Ascension*.

Thanatopsis is a universal poem. Except for the one reference to the Oregon, there is absolutely no American color. The subject is as universal as it is eternal, and it is strongly both. It is a hymn for humanity, irrespective of creeds, or civilizations, from Adam and Eve in the garden to the last man as the poet Campbell saw him. However, Bryant and his poetry generally are intensely American.

Bryant was the father and patriarch of American letters. With no ordinary emotions, I first clasped in my hands the bound volume of the magazine containing *Thanatopsis*; and, when I reverently turned the yellowing pages and read, it was figuratively with unsandalled feet, for I knew I stood on the entering threshold of our national literature.

In 1878 I was engaged on a magazine sketch which I entitled "The Bryant Brothers," but which was published in New York as an appreciation of John Howard Bryant, the younger of the two. At about that time I wrote two papers on William Cullen Bryant as an orator and as a hymn writer, reviewing a volume of Orations and Addresses, and a very thin volume containing his seventeen hymns

for religious worship, the latter privately printed and circulated, both of which he had sent to me. I had read a description of the commemorative silver vase presented to him by the Century Club of New York in connection with the celebration of his eightieth birthday. In the cincture of medallions, which, with other engravings all illustrative of the poet's life and writings, make the vase a work of art, is one representing a studious and dutiful lad seated at a desk, while an elderly man standing at his back points to a bust of Homer. I recalled the lines from the *Hymn to Death*:

For he is in his grave who taught my youth
The art of verse and in the bud of life
Offered me to the Muses.

To my letter of inquiry as to whether the illustration represented his father, Dr. Peter Bryant, in his solicitude over his son's choice of only the best and highest models for study and emulation, William Cullen Bryant wrote to me the letter which follows.

This letter was written on consecutive pages one, two, and three of ruled folio note-paper. The same sized sheet was used in other letters written to me between 1875 and 1878. There was no ruling on the other sheets, but the lines were strictly straight. The hand-writing is identical with the fac-simile of the manuscript of the Poet to be found in Bryant's Library of Poetry and Song, being as uniform, neat and legible, and as equally deficient in crossing of "t" 's and dotting of "i" 's, but somewhat more remiss in punctuation.

The letter leads up to the discovery in the poet's desk of *Thanatopsis*, which the father "did not find it necessary, or at least did not think proper, to revise"—an instance of transmitted genius much stronger in son than in sire.

"Please excuse my apparent negligence in answering your note," he wrote in a former letter. "It got among some other papers immediately after I received it and was overlooked!" A man of Bryant's eminence who could write thus to an unknown young man was not austere and cold, but to say the least approachable, as I always found him—a thorough American gentleman. Here follows Bryant's letter:

New York, March 14, 1878

Dear Sir:

You are quite right with respect to the aid which my father gave me in my early attempts in poetry, or rather in verse. He showed me how to amend my faulty lines, and how to avoid writing as I sometimes did utter nonsense. My grandfather on the mother's side once gave me a task when I was about eleven years old, or perhaps a year earlier, the first chapter of Job to put into verse. I made what I called a paraphrase of it. In it were these lines:

"His name was Job, evil he did eschew,
To him were born seven sons, three daughters too."

I remember that my father showed me that these lines were prosaic and badly expressed, and suggested some changes which led to the substitution of other lines in which the thought was somewhat amplified, but I have forgotten them entirely. When I wrote the poem entitled the "Embargo," at thirteen years of age I was greatly helped by his criticisms, as the work went on. He took it with him to Boston where it was published in a little pamphlet, and the next year after I had completed my fourteenth year another edition was published also in a duodecimo pamphlet, with several other poems in addition, all of which he had looked over and made me correct. When some years later he found among my poems the one entitled "Thanatopsis," and took it to the conductors of the "North American" where it was published, he did not find it necessary, or at least did not think proper, to revise it. One of his principal anxieties, in the beginning of my literary course, was to guard me against producing what had no recommendation but a certain showy glitter.

My brother John Howard Bryant is by a dozen years my junior. I hardly suppose that he was assisted by my father to the same extent that I was, for I think that he did not begin to write verses so early, and I was not at home to be a witness of it if he was guided by the same care. He would tell you however if you would write to him. His address is Princeton, Bureau County, Illinois.

Yours respectfully,
W. C. BRYANT.

A. F. Bridges, Esq.

The above letter is here first published. It has been sacredly kept, it seems, in order that it might become a contribution to the centenary of the birth of American poetry.

ALBERT FLETCHER BRIDGES.

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